SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE
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Jews and Non-Jews: Chosenness and its Consequences

Background Reading

1. David Hartman, "Revelation and Creation" from *A Heart of Many Rooms*

A HEART OF MANY ROOMS

Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism

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A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism

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REVELATION AND CREATION

THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL IN JUDAISM

IT HAS OFTEN been claimed that belief in revelation and divine election is incompatible with religious pluralism. Belief in the biblical Lord of history Who reveals Himself to His chosen people seems to reduce the faith commitment to one central issue. Given the competing claims of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to being the true heir to Abraham's legacy, the crucial concern of faith must be: Which faith community mediates God's vision for history? From such a viewpoint, religious tolerance and openness to other faith communities undermine uncompromising commitment to the true faith God has revealed.

The Bible is often noted for its zealous and passionate intolerance to idolatry, not for its liberalism or respect for other ways of worship. The prophetic, as opposed to the philosophic, pathos (Jerusalem vs. Athens) is held responsible for the religious wars of zealots claiming to possess the keys to the Kingdom. (The spatial claustrophobia of the religious sites in the Old City of Jerusalem is impressive.)

REVELATION AND CHOSENNESS

Traditionally, Christian theology regarded the Jews as those who blindly persisted in living according to a superseded divine dispensation. Islam treated both the Jewish and the Christian scriptural traditions as distortions of the truth proclaimed in the Koran. Responding on behalf of Judaism, Maimonides portrayed Christianity and Islam as aberrations, and argued that their adherents would repent of their folly when Jews returned to their ancient homeland and the Messiah reestablished the Jewish polity (M.T. *H. Melachim*, Judges 11). Are divine love and election subject to a scarcity principle that limits the authenticity of the faith experience to one and only one religious tradition? Must believing Jews view Christian pilgrims coming to Israel as earnest devotees ultimately misguided in their spiritual quest? Need their persistent advocacy of Christianity be an embarrassment and a threat to a Jew's faith commitment, and vice versa?

The locus of the problem is not the belief in one God but the belief in divine revelation and election. Theologies in the spirit of Aristotle, which recognize a monotheistic principle but without the notions of election and divine intervention in history, are compatible with religious pluralism. Divine worship where God is primarily a principle of perfection, eliciting adoration and religious fervor, can easily make room for multiple faith communities (see Yehuda Halevi, *The Kuzari*, I, 1–4). Similarly, eighteenth-century deism was a philosophically attractive alternative to biblical religion because it neutralized revelation and history, thereby allowing for religious tolerance and pluralism. The God who is above history is also above particular communities.

Those committed to the biblical tradition, however, cannot follow the deistic route to accommodate religious pluralism. They do not worship the "ground of being" but a God who is very much involved in human history. The biblical drama is concerned

essentially with history rather than nature. As Leo Strauss correctly emphasized in *Athens and Jerusalem*, it is the human being and not nature that is fashioned in God's image.

History and revelation mediate a divine reality that seeks to be embodied in the social and political structures of the faith community. But this raises the inevitable question: To whom is the word of God addressed? Even if world history as a whole is the framework within which the Divine Presence operates, the principle of election implies an exclusive providential relationship to a single community (see Ramban's commentary to Lev. 18:25).

Biblical revelation asserted God's involvement in human history. Because God has a stake in history, the divine–human encounter answers both divine and human interests. However scandalous it may sound to the metaphysician, the biblical tradition maintains that God does not execute His designs for history without the cooperation of at least some part of humankind. Revelation to a particular person or people thus becomes essential to the aims of the biblical Lord of history.

The notion of revelation implies that the human way to God must conform with the revealed word of God. If the faith experience were a matter of human beings seeking to express their awe and love for divinity—that is, if it were a one-directional movement of the human toward the divine—then the criterion of legitimate faith expressions would be subjective, allowing for a variety of religious attitudes and approaches. Kierkegaard's dictum "truth is subjectivity" could be used to justify multiple faith postures, each channeling the worshipper's feelings toward God. But in revelatory faiths where there is reciprocity between human beings and God, the will of God plays an essential role in determining the nature of religious life. It is not sufficient to express my own will and feelings. I must also ask: "What does God ask of me?" Revelation draws us into a dialogic relationship with God; natural theology, deism, and the worship of the "ground of

being" religions are ultimately monologues. Unlike the latter, revelatory systems require some source of knowledge of what God wants and how God responds to our religious practices. The individual's sincerity alone is not religiously self-validating; he or she must wait for God's response in order to determine the validity of his or her religious way of life.

Since God has such a stake in the divine–human relationship, the content of revelation is a vital component of biblical religion. A spouse may choose a gift for the beloved with infinite passion, yet the beloved may derive no pleasure from the gift itself. A gesture may be noble and expressive of deep emotion, yet its content may be unappealing. Revelation entails our asking whether God is prepared to sit down with us at the table we have prepared with passion and sincerity. As the book of Leviticus describes so graphically, questions of correct cultic practice and ritual are vital in a revelatory framework.

Herein lies the importance for biblical religion of knowing who has access to the revealed Word. The Torah and the New Testament disagree about forms of worship. Why did God accept Abel's offering and reject Cain's? Centuries of rivalry and conflict, when faith communities responded to one another according to the model of Cain and Abel, bear witness to the moral urgency of the dilemma of pluralism and biblical theology.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The biblical drama is marked by a dialectical interaction between the themes of creation and revelation. The Torah begins with God acting in freedom to create the universe. One's very existence as a creature implies a relationship to God. This relationship, however, does not involve concepts of election or history. All things created,

animate as well as inanimate, are affirmed as manifestations of God's will. "And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good" (Gen. 1:31). The experience that grows from human awareness of creation may be termed an "ontological relationship" to God. In the context of this relationship, all beings are equal creations of one God. By thus becoming conscious of the self, a human being becomes aware of the interconnectedness of all beings bound together by the divine, all-embracing love and power expressed in creation.

The Jewish prayer book speaks of God as "who in His goodness renews the act of creation continually each and every day," implying that divine creation is an abiding feature of reality and not merely a foundational moment. All things share an enduring ontological relationship with God. The joys of hearing a bird sing, of viewing a sunset, of being caressed by an evening breeze are all occasions for celebrating the gift of creation. All of life is sacred, because it mirrors the loving affirmation of the God of creation.

Creation, however, also contains the seeds of a dialectical movement to history, since the first human being was created endowed with freedom. Human freedom gives rise to human rebellion and sin, thus beginning a process leading to divine revelation and election. Freedom allows humankind to become separated and estranged from God. Sin and estrangement introduce the principles of divine judgment and divine responsiveness.

The God of creation can remain nondiscriminating: all of existence equally reflects the overflowing power of God. The early chapters of Genesis narrate God's repeated attempts to overcome the estrangement caused by human sin and rebellion. Humankind's unrelenting opposition to God's will, however, repeatedly frustrates these efforts. A new solution begins to emerge with the story of Abraham, which introduces the principle of *election.*

Through election, God seeks to create a community that will restore the primal relationship of being, not through creature consciousness but through commitment and choice.

The relationship between human beings and God is now mediated by human freedom. God no longer simply speaks and produces results automatically, as in the creation ("And God said...and there was"). With revelation and election, the arena of the God–human encounter shifts from nature to history. Because of the unpredictability of human history, the biblical story now becomes truly dramatic. God agrees, as it were, to share the stage with humanity, to limit His own freedom and power so as to sustain human freedom and responsibility.

> Now the Lord had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him? For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." (Gen. 18:17–19)

Before punishing the people of Sodom, God, as it were, consults with Abraham, His covenantal partner.

REVELATION AND COMMUNITY

In contrast to Martin Buber, who understands revelation and election in terms of radical spontaneity, classical Judaism interpreted Sinai in terms of the revelation of law to community. If

the aim of revelation is to build community, then spontaneity must be superseded or at least balanced by categories of structure and order. Divine involvement in history must not be limited to radical spontaneity and singular moments of surprise. The classic Jewish view stressed that the Sinai revelation established a community through mitzvot, which provide the structure of a permanent relationship with God.

Revelation expresses God's willingness to meet human beings in their finitude, in their particular historical and social situation, and to speak to them in their own language. All these constraints prevent one from universalizing the significance of a particular revelation. Revelation in history, therefore, is always fragmentary and incomplete. Divine–human encounters cannot ever exhaust the divine plenitude. New human situations demand reinterpretation of the content of revelation. That is why interpretation of and commentary on the content of revelation are continuous activities. While the commentator does not create an original, independent work, he or she plays a creative role in determining the normative content of revelation.

The Greek Neoplatonists believed that human reason could ascend to the level of divine thought and thus liberate the individual from the limits of human finitude. When Christian, Islamic, and Jewish theologians adopted this Greek concept of participation, they abandoned an essential feature of biblical religion, namely, creature consciousness. Subsequently, medieval philosophers went to great lengths to justify the need for revelation, given the belief that human beings could participate in the divine mind through reason.

Revelation need not be understood as a source of absolute, eternal, and transcendent truth. Rather, it is God's speaking to human beings within the limited framework of human language and history. Reason and revelation are not rival sources of

knowledge. Revelation is not unique by virtue of its cognitive content. The Bible does not compete with Plato or Aristotle. Revelation is an expression of God's love and confirmation of human beings in terms of their finitude and creatureliness; it is God's speaking to human beings for their own sake and not in order to reveal the mysteries of the Divine mind.

In Judaism, human beings become susceptible to the sin of idolatry when they believe they can transcend the limits of the human condition. There is nothing more efficacious for restoring humility to the human spirit than confronting people who do not share your "self-evident" truths. Because Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are distinct spiritual paths, they bear witness to the complexity and fullness of the Divine reality. The lack of unity within Christianity and Judaism testifies to the radical diversity within human consciousness and to the rich mosaic of views and practices inspired by the quest for God in human history. Consciousness of the existence of multiple faith commitments can be spiritually redemptive. It can help you realize that your own faith commitment does not exhaust the full range of spiritual options.

When the particularity of revelation is recognized, biblical faith does not have to seek to universalize itself. We may be living in a redemptive period of history precisely because religious pluralism has acquired legitimacy in the eyes of so many. Even though ecumenism is often driven by political considerations, the very fact that people feel the need to appear tolerant and committed to pluralism, whatever their inner convictions, indicates how deeply pluralism has become ingrained in the spirit of the age. In modern societies, people have little patience with exclusive, doctrinaire religious attitudes. Notwithstanding its problems and limitations, secular liberal society has created conditions for the emergence of religious humility by constraining the human propensity to universalize the particular.

CREATION AND MESSIANISM

Creation can be viewed as a metahistorical category. The creation story in Genesis can serve as a corrective to the possible distortions of God's revelation in history by conveying the idea that human beings must recognize the universal sanctify of life, since all of life was given through the creative power of God. A mishnah in *Sanhedrin* explains the significance of the creation of a single human being as follows:

> Therefore humankind was created singly, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul, Scripture accounts it as if he/she destroyed a full world; and whoever saves one soul, Scripture accounts it as if he/she saves a full world. And for the sake of peace among people, that one should not say to his fellow, "My father is greater than yours"; and that heretics should not say, "There are many powers in Heaven." Again, to declare the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, for a human being stamps out many coins with one die, and they are all alike, but the King, the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, stamped each human being with the seal of Adam, and not one of them is like another. Therefore each and every person is obliged to say, "For my sake the world was created." (IV, 5)

The Babylonian Talmud adds that God collected elements from the four corners of the earth to form the first human being. These two statements imply that the principle of the sanctity of life must not be limited by considerations of race, color, nationality, or creed. The principle of creation universalizes the sanctity of life, thereby extending it beyond the confines of any particular revelation.

An ethic based on the sanctity of life would satisfy Kant's condition of universalizability, since creation is prior to both revelation and election. Micah's vision of the end of days reflects the messianic significance of the creation theme:

In the days to come,
The Mount of the Lord's House shall stand
Firm above the mountains;
And it shall tower above the hills.
The peoples shall gaze on it with joy,
And the many nations shall go and shall say:
"Come,
Let us go up to the Mount of the Lord,
To the House of the God of Jacob;
That He may instruct us in His ways,
And that we may walk in His paths."
For instruction shall come forth from Zion,
The word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
Thus He will judge among the many peoples,
And arbitrate for the multitude of nations,
However distant;
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks.
Nations shall not take up
Sword against nation;
They shall never again know war;
But every man shall sit
Under his grapevine or fig tree
With no one to disturb him.
For it was the Lord of Hosts who spoke.
Though all the peoples walk
Each in the names of its gods,
We will walk

In the name of the Lord our God
Forever and ever. (Micah 4:1–5)

Our task today is to characterize messianism in terms of the universal ethical conception derived from creation. Faith commitments based on revelation may contain a universal thrust, not in order to universalize their particular understanding of revelation, but rather in order to universalize the ethical consciousness implied in the story of creation. No particular community can fully realize itself if the ethical fails to become embedded in human consciousness. As long as violence and brutality are dominant anywhere in the world, no particular community can fully realize its unique spiritual way of life because it must act to counter the threat posed by such violence and brutality. Historical redemption is impossible as long as Eichmanns and Himmlers walk the earth.

Herein lies the proper universal dimension of messianic aspirations. The messianic dream must be of a world in which all human beings realize that they were created in the image of God, that they owe their existence to God, and that therefore all of life is sacred. Only then will the God of creation reign in history.

Revelation implies that God accepts humanity with its limitations and recognizes that people realize their human potential within particular communities. To the committed Jew, Judaism means loving one's people's memories and one's parents' songs, loving Rabbi Akiva and Maimonides, living in a particular city and being a citizen of a particular country. The belief that space can become holy to God means that God allows the finite and particular to contain Him symbolically. This was God's message to Solomon at the dedication of the Temple. And this is the meaning of the Promised Land: God allowed Himself to be mirrored for a particular people in a particular land.

Nevertheless, the Jew lives out Judaism with great anticipation that one day all human beings will give up war and acknowledge the sacredness of life. Until there is universal triumph of the ethical, history will remain a fragile and inhospitable home for every human being. Does this mean that all humankind must embrace the Jew's history or recognize its superiority? No. Messianism may aspire to universal redemption through a universal acknowledgement of the Creator God, that is, through the principle of the sanctity of all life. The knowledge of God that will fill the earth on "that day" will be the knowledge derived from "creation" over and above "revelation."

The understanding of revelation and election just outlined can make room for religious pluralism. The key concept is the particularity of revelation. Revelation is not addressed to humanity in general, but to a particular individual or community. And because of this inherent particularity, it need not invalidate the faith experience of other religious communities.

Election represents a particularization of God's relationship to humankind by virtue of divine involvement in history, without the implication that there is only one exclusive mediator of the divine message. Consequently, theologians who claim that worshipping the universal God is incompatible with election are making a "category mistake." The universal God is the God of creation. But it is God as the Lord of history who enters into specific relationships with human beings and who is therefore loved in a particularistic manner. All intimate love relationships claim exclusivity by their very nature.

The distinction between creation and history enables biblical faith to admit the possibility of religious pluralism without neutralizing its passionate commitment to the biblical Lord of history. Revelation and election belong to the domain of history, where particular communities serve God in ways that mediate their particular memories.

The radical particularization of history eliminates the need for faith communities to regard one another as rivals. Competition between faith traditions arises when universality is ascribed to particular historical revelations. When revelation is understood as the concretization of the universal, then "*whose* truth is *the* truth?" becomes the paramount religious question, and pluralism becomes a vacuous religious ideal. If, however, revelation can be separated from the claim of universality, and if a community of faith can regain an appreciation of the particularity of the divine–human encounter, then pluralism can become a meaningful part of biblical faith experiences.

The dream of a universal community under the kingdom of God should be divorced from history. When it is the historical goal of a particular faith community, it can become, as it has been, a terribly dangerous idea. The fact that there are real differences among faith communities means that those who aspire to universality will often have to resort to a universalism of the sword. On the other hand, the concept of creation, not the concepts of community and history, must nurture the dream of a universal ethical awakening of human consciousness. The Jew, the Christian, and the Muslim are all one, insofar as they are creatures of God. One thus acknowledges the sacredness of life common to all human beings irrespective of their ways of life and modes of worship. Any person who takes a human life mars the image of God in all of us.

The Jewish people suffered for centuries from other peoples' misplaced emphasis on history as the domain in which to establish universal religious truth. The Jewish people had the opportunity to learn this lesson long before the twentieth century. Time and again it suffered for its stubbornness in resisting visions of universalization. As an expression of particularity in history, its very existence was often treated as a scandal. Thus, although the tendency toward universalization may have existed in Judaism itself

during the late biblical and early rabbinic periods, the lived history of the Jewish people subsequently became a testimony to the evil that results from universalizing the particular.

Jews express loyalty to their tradition not only by their allegiance to the Bible and to rabbinic texts but also by recognizing the implications of the lived experience of their people: "And I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel" (Lev. 22:32). We can respond halakhically to our past suffering by striving to discover in the contemporary world how the presence of "the other" can be spiritually redemptive. Thus the attempt to establish a secure framework for religious pluralism and tolerance in the State of Israel is not tangential to our national rebirth. Our return to independent political existence affords us the opportunity to become the first biblical religion to acknowledge that revelation can never exhaust the plenitude of creation. One bears witness to the God of creation by rejoicing in the limits of one's own finitude.

Our return to normalcy can become an assertion of the religious significance of particularity. We have returned not to a universal, heavenly Jerusalem but to a particular, earthly Jerusalem. The dream of history should not be the victory of one faith community. Each faith community should walk before God in its own way while remembering that no community can exhaust the universal God of creation.

The conception of home, which our particular historical memories have nurtured, must be integrated with the theme of creation that proclaims the dignity of every human being. Exclusive reliance on revelation would make it impossible for us to share our home with the Palestinian people. If, however, our consciousness of revelation were to become infused with creation, then we could learn to celebrate our coming home even if it were not be realized fully and completely.

The rabbinic tradition taught us to say grace even over incomplete meals, for it realized that God does not always offer us

finished and complete frameworks of meaning. The rabbis in the Talmud understood this when they related the story of the ministering angels questioning God for "showing favoritism to Israel."

> Sovereign of the Universe, it is written in Your Law, "Who lifts not up the countenance [shows no favor] and takes no bribe" (Deut. 10:17), but do You not regard the person of Israel, as it is written, "The Lord lift up His countenance [bestow His favor] upon you" (Num. 6:26)? He replied to them: And shall I not lift up My countenance for Israel, seeing that I wrote for them in the Torah, "And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God" (Deut. 8:10) but they are particular [to say grace] even if the quantity is but an olive or an egg! (B.T. *Berachot* 20b)

I understand this midrash to mean that although, in the Torah, God enjoined Israel to say grace after a full and satisfying meal, Israel developed the capacity to say grace even over small, incomplete meals. The rabbis thus taught us to experience religious gratitude for the incomplete and the partial satisfaction of our desires.

I can understand the pain that many Israelis feel at the prospect of sharing their home with "an other." In doing so, however, they would bear witness to Judaism's ability to combine "Beloved is Israel" with "Beloved is every human being created in the image of God."